American poetry took off in all directions after 1900. What new voices were heard for the first time? When did “the outsider” become valuable? How did poetry organize itself for modernity? Why are some of these poems still useful today?

In this survey course of twentieth century American poetry, we’ll focus on three defining poets – Robert Frost, William Carlos Williams, T. S. Eliot – but we’ll counter them with other works by Edna St Vincent Millay, Wallace Stevens, Mina Loy, Marianne Moore, Ezra Pound and Hart Crane. We’ll also take up examples by several British poets – W. B. Yeats, D. H. Lawrence, W. H. Auden – who are, in their own way, shaping the contours of modernist Anglophone work.

We’ll spend the most time with these poets as they are crucial antecedents for understanding why poetry after mid-century made some of the turns it did, but we’ll also see those turns in work by Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill and Frank O’Hara. Finally, we’ll consider the possibility that, after 1970, poetry took cues for its development not from literary forebears so much as current events. After 1970, a new generation of poets challenged themselves to respond to the material of history, to the need for political change, and the pursuit of social justice, and this commitment dominates American poetry in the twenty-first century. We can see this in works by Yusef Komunyakaa, Mark Doty, Susan Wheeler, and A. Van Jordan.

In the course of the semester, we’ll see that American poetry in the opening of the twentieth century was already tilting toward examinations of everyday materials and ordinary events. We’ll look at poems that treat warfare and trauma, property and marriage, and skyscrapers and meadows. We’ll consider examples of “microverse” (under four lines long), and examples of poetry that borrow directly from vernacular musical forms such as jazz and the blues. We’ll also take up surrealist experimentation and consider how the “surrealist” movement was redefined when it appeared in a machine-age that seemed ready to invent anything new. We’ll examine elaborate hoaxes that invent bogus movements such as “Spectrism” that were deliberately silly (in an effort to support the values of traditional verse). We’ll evaluate parodies that also set out to mock the new verse but instead served to instruct audiences in how to read ironically (and thus helped to create the smart audience that the new verse needed).

Finally, as a member of the Advisory Board that helped select texts for the first and second editions of the we’re using, I’ll also be able to shed some light on the process of selection for such a large undertaking.

Weekly exercises will examine special topics; at mid-semester a take-home midterm will generate a range of responses to works we’ve read so far. Those responses form the basis for a 10- to 12-page conference paper that we will work on together as a capstone assignment.
American poetry took off in all directions after 1900. What new voices were heard for the first time? Why did “the outsider” become culturally valuable? How did poetry organize itself to see modernity? What makes some modern poems still useful for understanding today? We’ll talk about poems that examine warfare and trauma, property and marriage, skyscrapers and meadows, and invent new poetic forms rooted in settings like jazz and the blues or offering a micropoetry of 4 lines or less. Our focus is a handful of major poems, three or four by figures such as Robert Frost, Williams Carlos Williams, Edna Millay, T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore and Hart Crane; we’ll also turn toward more recent poets (Robert Lowell, Elizabeth Bishop, James Merrill, Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery). We will in addition leave open the chance to take up very recent poetry as well as linking up with examples from British poets (Yeats, Lawrence, Auden) who are generating their own brand of modernist work. Finally, as a member of the Advisory Board that helped select the poems for this anthology’s second edition (as well as its first), I’ll also be able to shed light on the selection process for an extensive anthology.

Weekly exercises will examine special topics; at mid-semester there will be a take-home midterm that will generate responses to works so far and that will in turn form the basis for a 10- to 12-page conference paper that we will work on together for a final assignment.